

Editorial

Innovations and Development in Urban Planning Scholarship and Research

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Abstract

Urban planning is characterized by involving a wide range of experts from a variety of fields. Therefore, planning research draws upon each of these fields in how it interprets and examines the natural and built environment as elements of human settlement activities. As a small professional and academic discipline incorporating aspects of design, policy, law, social sciences, and engineering, it is understandable that research outcomes are published in a broad range of academic outlets. It is useful for us to reflect on our research intentions, processes, and outcomes, which is also referred to as ‘research about research,’ with a focus on the scholarly products of urban planning academics. We can do this by examining our methodologies, subdomains, application of research to practice, research impact, and bibliometrics. The purpose of reflecting on our research helps us better understand research processes and the resulting body of urban planning research and scholarship as a whole.

Keywords

planning; research; scholarship

Issue

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1. Introduction

As an academic field, urban planning straddles traditional social sciences and professional training. The role and nature of research is quite different in these two cases, as are the professional expectations. The expectation for planning academics is to produce scholarship (i.e., published works) adding to the body of knowledge about planning thought and processes. Practice-oriented research primarily focuses on the elements of plan-making. As such, contributions to academic literature are very different products and activities compared to planning reports or plans, although both draw upon and contribute to planning knowledge. The continuum of planning research, spanning from theory to application, has been the subject of ongoing debate.

Wildavsky’s (1973, p. 127) statement, “If planning is everything, maybe it’s nothing,” refers to the breadth of urban planning, recognizing that urban development processes are quite complex, far beyond a singular def-

inition or approach. These approaches represent fields including sociology, economics, engineering, political science, and public administration—that in themselves continue to grow and change. For a planner to understand the systems represented by these fields is a significant endeavor that aims to capture and translate interdisciplinary knowledge across the associated academic domains (Shin, 2014). This means that scholars are forced to specialize, which further fragments knowledge domains such as planning. Like general practitioners in other professions, planning practitioners with a general knowledge of planning processes defer to professionals with specialized training such as engineers, attorneys, and designers (Friedmann, 1996).

The debate about the variety of topics of concern to planning educators and practitioners seemingly results from diverse definitions of ‘planning’ and foci of planning practice. Perspectives differ in how planning situates place and process as well as the intensions of planning efforts (Edwards & Bates, 2011). This may make planning

appear to be diffuse and incoherent to those outside of the field. Wildavsky acknowledged the challenges of planning in its all-encompassing dimensions, where he stated that “Planning requires the resources, knowledge, and power of an entire people” (Wildavsky, 1973, p. 152). It was also in the same issue of *Policy Sciences* that the Wildavsky article appeared (1973, No. 4) that Rittel and Webber (1973) described how planning problems are inherently “wicked.” Solutions to wicked problems are elusive due to their complexity and lack of scientific rules. Later insights on these topics shared by Alexander (1981), Reade (1982), Klosterman (1985), and Wadley and Smith (1998) reiterate that ‘planning’ has several definitions that depend on philosophical and ideological perspectives.

2. Suggested Areas of Research about Research

As Davoudi and Pendlebury (2010) argue, the planning profession benefits from a coherent realm of discourse, that can facilitate problem recognition in a specific institutional context. This may seem the case to those inside the field, but perhaps not so easily recognized by those outside of the field. One can argue that planning meets these criteria. Another approach would be to use urban planning curricula to describe planning, but this would likely neglect a variety of topics that are not taught, either because they are very specific, do not fit an academic format, or lack of student interest. Urban planning curricula also vary depending on faculty composition and specializations. And yet, planning does not appear to have “any guiding principle or central paradigm” with a very large number of concepts to master, along with societal dynamics (Beauregard, 1990).

The preceding discussion about urban planning research has direct implications for how we perceive and utilize the body of research. We hope that increased awareness and reflection on urban planning research outcomes will also better connect to practice as well as urging practice to inform scholarly activities. How do we continue to innovate our research processes to better understand the condition of urban places? Critical reflection on our research activities will hopefully lead to innovation through a consistent effort to generate new knowledge. The following briefly outlines four areas that are recommended as areas to be researched about planning research.

2.1. The Context of Planning Research

There are differing opinions about the level of emphasis that should be placed upon purely academic research and research that directly serves the planning profession. This also varies by the type of academic institutions where planning faculty reside and the mission of their institutions. Research and practice complement each other as well as create tension within academic and professional communities. Exploring this,

Alexander (2017) connects planning theory, research, and practice in a historical context set in a diverse planning agenda. This has direct implications for the purposes and approaches to planning problems. The inherent ‘gap’ between research and practice suggests that planning academics lack direct professional planning experience. This gap may be narrowed with greater attention being paid to practice-oriented research to identify “planning cultures” that influence the directions of planning research. In addition, they refer to research traditions which pervade academia.

2.2. Types and Topics of Planning Research

The knowledge domain of planning is comprised of many interwoven elements. Given that the urbanization process is at the confluence of natural, human, and built environment systems, we would expect that planning scholarship would reflect this. While some integration occurs, research areas develop their own cultures and communities of scholarship. Analyses of research topics describe the footprint of planning research topics as well as the evolution and explicit connections in an interdisciplinary context (see Sanchez & Afzalan, 2017). We can expect that these topics will change over time with changing urban conditions as well as the techniques we use to observe these conditions. Recent events in the U.S. (including the Black Lives Matter movement and COVID-19 pandemic) have generated renewed criticism around the lack of diversity in scholarly topics as well as the lack of diversity among scholars in the planning academy. This exemplifies the need to look critically at research processes and scholarly practice.

2.3. Planning Research on Objects and Design

Planning scholarship traditionally employs a variety of methods that are both quantitative and qualitative, also ranging in scale. This includes discussion of the ‘boundary’ between planning research and design. Quantitative analyses often lead us to over-generalize, while real planning problems are specific, and case-based. For instance, the many approaches to urban morphology highlight ways in which ‘form’ cannot currently be easily quantified. Change detection and pattern recognition to understand built environments and settlement activities have fascinating pedagogies with deep connections to theory. The boundary between planning and design is often questioned and argues for a strengthening of this critical connection. These discussions challenge scholars and students relative to research design and methods selection, especially those with non-design backgrounds.

2.4. Planning Methods, Science, and Technology

Methods related to science and technology in urban planning are constantly changing, requiring re-examination on a continual basis. For instance, there has been

increasing interest in analytical methods and modelling at the urban scale. These applications have broadened to include information and communications technologies (ICTs) and distributed analytic capabilities. These are valuable insights that connect to ‘research to practice’ themes including advances in ICTs and their potential for planning research opportunities. Previously referred to as Planning Support Systems, these technologies can be used to collect, analyze, and communicate a vast array of data types. At the same time, these tools can be made available to ‘citizen scientists’ who are extending the traditional model of citizen participation. Citizen science is a collaborative model well-suited to urban planning research activities that can build grassroots capacity. The intersection of theory and methods highlights, in part, the underlying scientific approach is taken by many urban planning researchers.

3. Thematic Issue Contributions

The five articles appearing in this thematic issue exemplify some of the important dimensions of planning ‘research about research’ mentioned above that contribute to innovative approaches and perspectives. Rivera (2021, p. 93) discusses the multifaceted aspects of design in planning, particularly by advocating for “training planners to both envision and build alternate possible worlds.” This references a departure from the dominant social scientific approaches to planning research most common today. Töppel and Reichel (2021) present an innovative approach to “spatial perception” with a mixture of methods to better understand places, integrating visual and spatial data with survey methodologies as case studies and intersecting questions of context, objects and design, and techniques with technology. Terashima and Clark (2021) provide an example of the use of topic analysis across the field of urban planning. Such approaches can be used to assess the coverage of topics, and in this case, the lack of attention given to important planning issues like the needs of disabled persons. Types and topics of planning research can also be examined through bibliometric methods, and other meta-research approaches. The purpose is to better understand the corpus based on publication characteristics and trends. Chang (2021) examines the discourse of the “temporary use” through symbolism as a socio-semiotic process, an approach focusing on the evolution of this scholarly path, and Sanchez (2021) combines bibliometric analysis with measures of social media activity (Twitter) by urban planning academics to detect levels of effort into each as a function of professional rank. Stiftel’s (2021) astute interpretation of these articles asks (and answers) whether research leads practice—it does not.

4. Conclusions

As our understanding of cities grows and changes, we can expect that our means and methods of observation

should change as well. Can we continue to use the same methods and perspectives to understand phenomena not previously detected? The interaction of social, economic, and environmental systems is not static or predictable on the urban to rural continuum, particularly as global connections impact all aspects of our lives. Our research processes should strive to innovate and adapt at the same time.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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